

Sheep Creek West Wilderness Study Area

1. The Study Area -- 11,680 acres

The Sheep Creek West WSA (ID-111-36A) is located in Owyhee County about 105 miles southeast of Boise, Idaho. The WSA includes 11,680 acres of BLM land with no nonfederal inholdings. The eastern half of the WSA is bounded by primitive dirt roads and most of the remainder of the area is bordered by fences.

The WSA is bisected by the spectacular 800-foot deep gorge of Sheep Creek Canyon. A series of cliffs, rock outcroppings and talus slopes descend to a dense riparian zone along the 6.5 miles of Sheep Creek. The gorge is surrounded by scenic plateau lands with quaking aspen trees highlighting a series of elongated buttes. Adjacent to the aspen groves are thick pockets of brush with snowberry the most prevalent species. Sagebrush and grass cover the remainder of the plateau.

The WSA was studied under Section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) and was included in the Management Framework Plan (MFP) for the Bruneau Resource Area finalized in March 1983. The recommendation for wilderness generated through the planning process was evaluated in the Jacks Creek Wilderness Environmental Impact Statement filed in July 1989. Two alternatives were analyzed in the EIS: an all wilderness alternative where 11,680 acres would be designated as wilderness, which is the recommendation of this report; and a no wilderness alternative.

2. Recommendation and Rationale

11,680 acres recommended for wilderness

0 acres recommended for nonwilderness

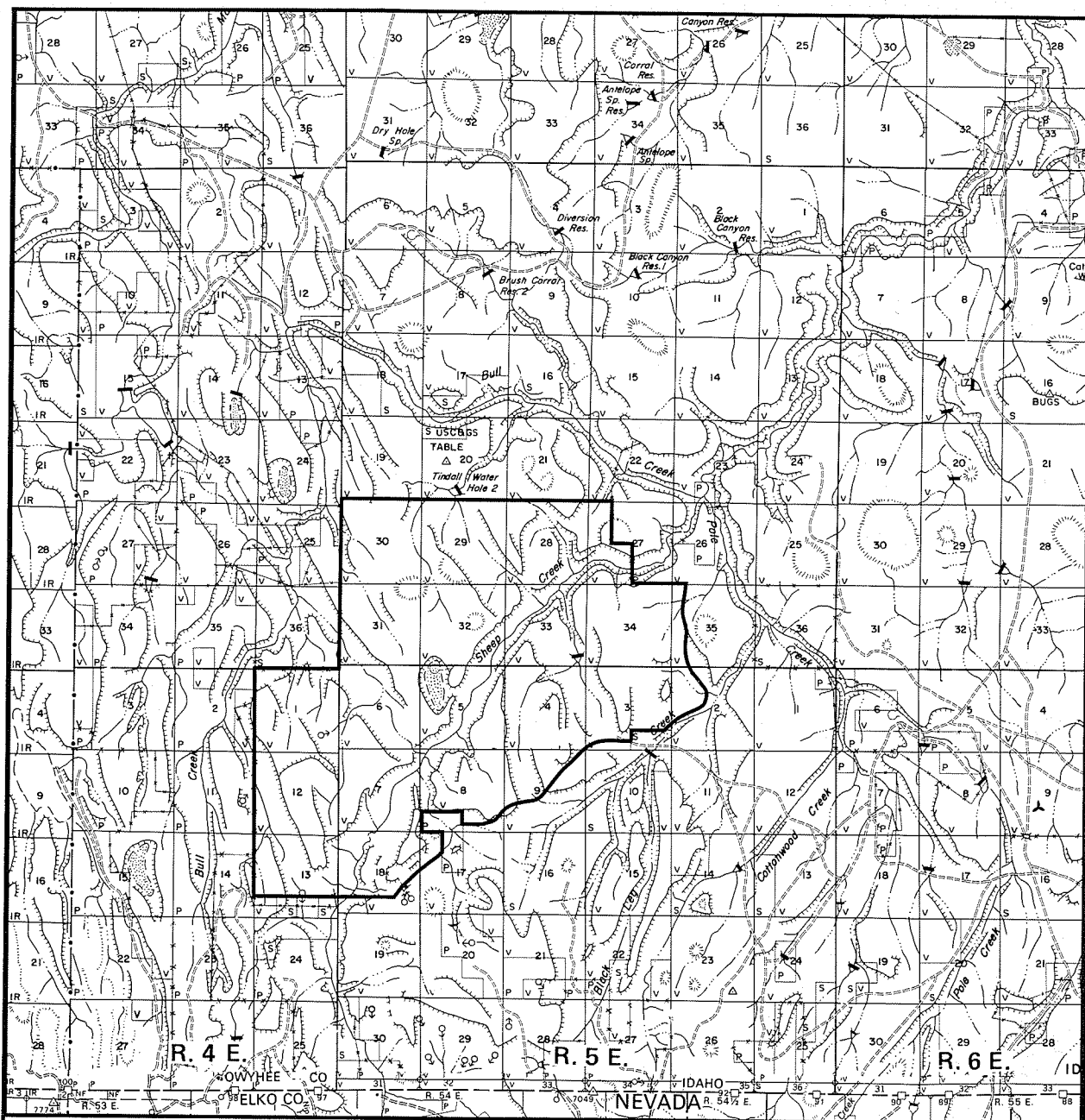
The recommendation for the Sheep Creek West WSA is to designate the entire WSA (11,680 acres) as wilderness. This is the environmentally preferable alternative. It would cause the least change from the natural environment over the long term.

The 11,680 acres of federal land recommended for wilderness designation are shown as the nonshaded area on the Sheep Creek West Proposal map.

The area recommended for wilderness would enhance the National Wilderness Preservation System through the addition of the spectacular gorge of Sheep Creek and the surrounding scenic hills. The area offers outstanding opportunities for primitive recreation within a natural setting.







This WSA has the widest diversity of plant communities among areas under wilderness review in the Boise District. It is located in an ecotone between the Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem and a coniferous forest ecosystem which accounts for its wide diversity of plant communities. Five major ecological communities are well represented including big sagebrush, low sagebrush, mountain brush, quaking aspen woodlands and riparian communities. The WSA also contains significant intrusions of silver sagebrush communities. About 55 percent of the WSA is in good-to-excellent ecological condition and is indicative of pre-settlement vegetation. This is the only proposed wilderness area in the Boise District providing representation of mountain brush and quaking aspen woodland communities. These are also the only mountain brush and aspen communities under wilderness review in the District that are in good ecological condition. Sagebrush steppe vegetation once encompassed about ten percent of the continental U.S. or about 130,000,000 acres. The National Wilderness Preservation System currently includes about 41,545 acres of this ecosystem, although none of the designated areas include examples of the deep rhyolite/basalt canyons that characterize the landform of Sheep Creek West WSA. This WSA would be an excellent addition to the wilderness system as a representation of this ecosystem because of its diversity of plant communities, the good ecological condition of its vegetation and because it would add representation of deep rhyolite/basalt canyons to the National Wilderness Preservation System.

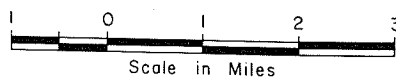
Wilderness designation would have no significant impact on other resource uses. Domestic livestock grazing would remain at or near existing levels regardless of the wilderness decision. The area is of low mineral potential. The area can be managed in the long-term to protect and maintain wilderness characteristics. Rough topography and rocky soils would prevent or discourage motorized vehicle use in the vast majority of the area. About two-thirds of the boundary is fenced. Wilderness designation would provide long-term protection to an exceptionally scenic area with outstanding wilderness and ecological values.



R. 4 E. | R. 5 E.

R. 5 E. | R. 6 E.

-  RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS
  SPLIT ESTATE
-  RECOMMENDED FOR NONWILDERNESS
  STATE
-  LAND OUTSIDE WSA RECOMMENDED FOR WILDERNESS
  PRIVATE



**ID-111-36A
SHEEP CREEK WEST
PROPOSAL**

FEBRUARY 1989

**Table 1 -- Land Status and Acreage Summary of the Study Area
SHEEP CREEK WEST**

Within Wilderness Study Area

BLM (surface and subsurface)	11,680
Split Estate (BLM surface only)	0
Inholdings (state, private)	0
 Total	 11,680

Within the Recommended Wilderness Boundary

BLM (within WSA)	11,680
BLM (outside WSA)	0
Split Estate (within WSA)	0
Split Estate (outside WSA)	0
 Total BLM Land Recommended for Wilderness	 11,680
 Inholdings (state, private)	 0
 State land (outside WSA)	 0

Within the Area Not Recommended for Wilderness

BLM	0
Split Estate	0
 Total BLM Land Not Recommended for Wilderness	 0
 Inholdings (state, private)	 0

3. Criteria Considered in Developing the Wilderness Recommendations

Wilderness Characteristics

A. Naturalness

The Sheep Creek West WSA consists of a hilly area dissected by 6.5 miles of deep canyons. Numerous wildlife species including mule deer, pronghorn, sage grouse, raptors and redband trout are found in the area. About 93 percent of the area is natural appearing. Human imprints include nine small livestock water developments, a livestock trail, a few fences and several vague vehicle tracks (ways). The livestock trail was constructed during the wilderness review process without BLM authorization.

B. Solitude

The WSA does not have outstanding opportunities for solitude because of the topography's potential to concentrate visitors along narrow corridors, the short length and configuration of the canyon and rim corridors and the lack of sufficient topographic and vegetative screening on the surrounding plateau.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

Sheep Creek West WSA has outstanding opportunities for primitive recreation because of its scenic, vegetative and topographic diversity, 6.5 miles of perennial streams with good trout fishing and excellent opportunities to view wildlife.

The primary recreation attraction of the WSA is the exceptionally scenic gorge of Sheep Creek. The narrow, V-shaped canyon plummets 800 feet in a series of cliffs, rock outcropping and talus slopes to a dense riparian vegetation zone along the creek. Scattered stands of aspen occur on the canyon slopes in areas of spring seepage.

The spectacular canyon vistas seen from the rim are supplemented by the scenic plateau. Aspen thickets cover the north and eastern rimrocks of the area's small tables. The aspen grows adjacent to springs and where late spring snowpack lingers.

The plateau and canyon corridors of the WSA provide primitive recreation opportunities for a variety of uses such as hiking, backpacking, fishing and hunting. On the plateau where access routes are excellent, spectacular vistas in a natural setting are available without the physical demands normally associated with wilderness travel. Those who seek greater physical demands and challenges can descend 800 feet and travel in the river corridor where large boulders and dense riparian vegetation provide obstacles.

Trout fishing is good in the canyon depths where Sheep Creek winds through the WSA. The most common game fish is redband trout. Mule deer are frequently seen in the canyon and adjacent to the aspen groves on the plateau. Large herds of pronghorn antelope are often seen on the plateaus.

D. Special Features

The entire Sheep Creek West WSA is exceptionally scenic with the aspen-banded plateaus rivaling the 800-foot deep canyon of Sheep Creek in scenic splendor. In the distance, the snow-capped mountains of Nevada's Jarbidge Wilderness provide a spectacular backdrop. The narrow, V-shaped canyon of Sheep Creek, the lush green riparian oasis adjacent to the creek, pockets of aspen in the canyon and the narrow bands of aspen that dissect the plateau create a contrasting variety of landform and color that changes with the seasons as the aspen turn from spring's emerging green to fall's brilliant gold.

The WSA includes more than 6,300 acres of sagebrush steppe plateaus in near-pristine condition. These plateaus include the widest diversity of vegetative communities found in any areas under wilderness review in the Boise District. These are rare remnants of an ecosystem that once dominated more than ten percent of the United States continental land base.

The WSA includes 6.5 miles of redband trout habitat. This desert-adapted trout species is found in southern Idaho, eastern Oregon and northern Nevada and has been classified as a sensitive species.

Diversity in the National Wilderness Preservation System

A. Assessing the Diversity of Natural Systems and Features as Represented by Ecosystems

Wilderness designation would not add a new ecosystem to the National Wilderness Preservation System; however, it would add a landform not presently represented in the Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem. The landform of the Sheep Creek West WSA is dominated by a deep rhyolite- and basalt-lined canyon. Vegetation is characteristic of the sagebrush steppe sagebrush/bunchgrass ecosystem. This WSA is particularly valuable as a representation of this landform/vegetation combination because of its diversity of vegetation communities and because more than 6,300 acres of the sagebrush steppe plateau are in good-to-excellent ecological condition, characteristic of pre-settlement vegetation. This ecosystem is represented by three designated areas with 76,699 acres. There are 35 other BLM areas in the state under study with this ecosystem. This information is summarized on Table 2.

TABLE 2
Ecosystem Representation

Bailey-Kuchler Classification	NWPS Areas		Other BLM Studies	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
Dry Domain/Intermountain Sagebrush Province				
			<u>NATIONWIDE</u>	
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	3	76,699	136	4,359,340
			<u>IDAHO</u>	
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	1	12,997	35	949,916
			<u>NEVADA</u>	
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	1	32,407	29	1,273,919
			<u>CALIFORNIA</u>	
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	0		5	152,431
			<u>OREGON</u>	
Sagebrush Steppe Ecosystem	0	0	67	1,983,074

**B. Expanding the Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive Recreation
Within a Day's Driving Time (Five Hours) of Major Population Centers**

The Sheep Creek West WSA is within a five-hour drive from Boise, Idaho. Table 3 summarizes the number and acreage of designated areas and other BLM study areas within a five-hour drive of the population center.

Table 3
**Wilderness Opportunities for Residents
of Major Population Centers**

Population Centers	<u>NWPS Areas</u>		<u>Other BLM Studies</u>	
	areas	acres	areas	acres
Boise, Idaho	16	4,741,570	141	5,374,250

C. Balancing the Geographic Distribution of Wilderness Areas

The Sheep Creek West WSA would not add significantly to the geographical distribution of areas within the NWPS. Regionally, the WSA would add a desert canyon and plateau area not found in designated wilderness and would help to balance opportunities to attain diverse wilderness experiences.

Manageability

The entire WSA can be managed in the long term to protect and maintain its wilderness characteristics and values. It contains no private inholdings, mining claims or mineral leases. Eight of the area's nine livestock water developments were constructed under the Bureau's Wilderness Interim Management Policy (IMP) and the cooperative agreement specifies that motorized access would not be necessary for maintenance if the area were designated wilderness. The other livestock water development is already serviced by a primitive vehicle route. About two-thirds of the WSA boundary is fenced. Rough topography and rocky soils would prevent or discourage motorized use in the vast majority of the area.

Energy and Minerals Resource Values

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and the Bureau of Mines (BM) completed a mineral assessment of the Sheep Creek West WSA in 1988.

Investigations conducted by the USGS and BM determined the WSA was of low mineral and energy resource potential for metals, geothermal resources and oil and gas. No claims, leases or mineral workings were identified.

Geodes found in a small area along the southeastern boundary of the WSA lack features demanded by rockhounds and gem dealers but could be of interest to collectors. Placer gold occurs in the sand and gravel of Sheep Creek but values are too low to support commercial mining at the current market value. The occurrence could attract recreational panning or sluicing.

Impacts on Resources

The following comparative impact table summarizes the effects on pertinent resources for the alternatives considered including designation or nondesignation of the entire WSA as wilderness.

Table 4

**Comparative Summary of the Impacts by Alternative
WSA ID-111-136A (SHEEP CREEK WEST)**

ISSUE TOPICS	PROPOSED ACTION (ALL WILDERNESS ALTERNATIVE)	NO WILDERNESS/NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE
Impacts on Wilderness Values	(11,680 acres) Naturalness and opportunities for solitude/primitive recreation would be enhanced on about 50 acres affected by road closures. Opportunities for solitude could be slightly diminished in Sheep Creek Canyon as recreation use increases.	(11,680 acres) Opportunities for solitude could be slightly diminished in Sheep Creek Canyon as recreation use increases.
Impacts on Recreation Use	Annual recreation use would be about 200 visitor days, an increase of 150 annual visitor days over current use. There would be no significant impact on opportunities to participate in ORV use or hunting.	Annual recreation use would be about 200 visitor days, an increase of 150 annual visitor days over current use. Opportunities to participate in off-road vehicle use or hunting would not be affected.
Impacts on Selected Wildlife Species	Mule deer would increase up to 5%. Pronghorn would increase up to 5%. Sage grouse would increase up to 10%.	Mule deer would increase up to 5%. Pronghorn would increase up to 5%. Sage grouse would increase up to 5%.
Impacts on Income and Jobs	There would be \$4,705 of additional annual income and .3 new jobs. Implementation costs would be \$1,800 annually for wilderness management.	There would be \$4,705 of additional annual income and .3 new jobs. There would be no implementation costs.

Local Social and Economic Considerations

Designation of the entire Sheep Creek West WSA or any portion of the WSA as wilderness would have no significant social or economic effects on Owyhee County.

Summary of WSA-Specific Public Comments

Public involvement has occurred throughout the wilderness review process. Certain comments received during the inventory process and early stages of the EIS preparation were used to develop significant study issues and various alternatives for the ultimate management of those lands found to have wilderness values. During the wilderness inventory for the Sheep Creek West roadless unit, 20 public commenters supported establishing a WSA and five opposed it. Reasons cited among those who supported establishment of a WSA were the area's spectacular scenery (six comments), outstanding opportunities for hiking and backpacking (five comments), fishing opportunities (two comments), natural appearance (two comments), its abundance of wildlife (two comments), archaeological sites (two comments), and its geological values (two comments). Those opposed to designation of the WSA cited opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation were limited to the canyon (three comments), a major livestock trail crosses the WSA (two comments), imprints of humans are frequently found in the area (two comments), and that the area can be better managed under multiple use (two comments).

During the public review of the Bruneau MFP, 26 out of 30 comments supported wilderness designation. Most of these cited the area's ecological values as the primary reason for wilderness designation and several suggested that livestock grazing should be discontinued in pristine portions of the proposed wilderness.

During the public review of the Draft Jacks Creek Wilderness EIS, 151 written and oral comments addressing this WSA were received. Public hearings were held in Boise and Grand View, Idaho. Seventy-seven commenters supported wilderness designation for all of the WSA, 48 commenters supported no wilderness for the WSA, while 26 commenters took no formal position on wilderness designation.

Among those supporting wilderness, 80 percent were Idaho residents with a majority from Ada County; 12 percent were from other western states; and eight percent were residents of eastern states. The reasons cited for wilderness designation were preservation of wildlife habitat, to provide primitive recreation opportunities and solitude, to preserve scenic quality, and to maximize protection of fisheries and riparian habitat. Twelve wilderness supporters pointed out that wilderness designation would have minimal resource conflicts with other resource uses.

About 85 percent of the comments opposing wilderness designation were from local residents with about 40 percent from Owyhee County, 35 percent from Ada County, and ten percent from Canyon and Elmore Counties. The remaining 15 percent were from residents of other western states. Twenty-two of these commenters believe that wilderness designation would discriminate against senior citizens and the handicapped. Other reasons for opposing wilderness were wilderness is not effective management (too inflexible and costly), wilderness is not multiple use, Idaho has enough wilderness, wilderness values do not need wilderness designation for protection, wilderness would close the door to future oil and gas exploration work.

Several agencies commented on the draft EIS. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of Air Force and Idaho Department of Fish and Game supported wilderness designation. The Owyhee County Commissioners opposed designation. The Federal Aviation Agency, Environmental Protection Agency and the Idaho State Historical Society did not express an alternative preference.